JFK panel is dealt fatal blow

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A panel discussion on the JFK assassination was abruptly canceled because of the death of a key participant.

The event, titled "What Do We 'Know' about the JFK Assassination (and What Can We Do About It?)" was scheduled for Wednesday night at the Louden Nelson Center.

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It was scrapped late last week when organizers were informed that one of the event's two speakers — prominent JFK assassination researcher Robert Ranftel, 39,

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of Berkeley — was found dead on a Berkeley street in the early morning hours Jan. 29. Ranftel was discovered slumped against a curb near his Berkeley home, a bicycle by his side.

The cause of Ranftel's death is unknown pending completion of a toxicology report, said a spokesman for the Alameda County Coroner's Office.

David Ratcliffe, a Santa Cruz researcher who has conducted extensive interviews with Col. L. Fletcher Prouty — inspiration for the Mr. X character in Oliver Stone's controversial film "JFK" — was slated to join Ranftel on the panel.

Ranftel is the former director of the Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington D.C., the nation's largest private collection of material on political assassinations. He worked as an adviser and researcher on such JFK assassination books as "Conspiracy" by Anthony Summers and "Best Evidence" by David Lifton.

Ranftel also was among the researchers who urged the Senate Select Committee on Assassinations to reopen the investigation into JFK's death in 1974. He released to the media in 1987 a Nixon administration document seeking information on suspected homosexuals in Capitol press corps.

Many conspiracy theorists contend that since 1963, various researchers and key witnesses in the JFK assassination have been systematically killed because of what they knew about the slaying. And some local conspiracy buffs couldn't help but question the circumstances of Ranftel's death.

"You gotta wonder," said Mark Zepezauer, a local author and editor who was scheduled to be a questioner at the forum.

"Suspicious, I guess, is a subjective term, but if you have any inclination in that direction one just has to wonder," said Zepezauer, author of "The Nixon Saga" and co-editor of the Comic News.

"It's not unreasonable to assume that heart attacks can be induced and certainly the CIA has been doing that sort of thing since the early '60s," he said. "There is certainly no evidence of foul play, but 'suspect' would not be an unreasonable term to use. ... It's not out of bounds to question it."

Ranftel's obituary in a San Francisco newspaper Feb. 6 said he was receiving medical treatments for depression, but Grant Wilson, local coordinator for event co-sponsors the Christic Action Group, said Ranftel's untimely death seemed "strange. ...

"It is rather disturbing. It's hard to know what (caused his death). ... Maybe he took an overdose of pills. What's strange is that we had got a letter from him saying that he was looking forward to doing this event in Santa Cruz," said Wilson.

"It didn't appear to us that he was depressed. He was looking forward to coming down. It sounded like he was pretty motivated," Wilson said. "It's definitely caused us some concern."

Les Gripkey, a local activist who recently returned from a JFK assassination symposium in Dallas, was not as hasty to question Ranftel's death.

"I don't think he was in that great of health," said Gripkey, who also was to ask questions at the event. A close friend of Ranftel's did not sound suspicious when he passed the word by telephone that Ranftel had died, said Gripkey.

Gripkey said Ranftel had recently turned his attention to other pursuits, including the plight of the homeless. "If there was ever going to be a time (for Ranftel to die suspiciously) it was when he was going through hundreds of thousands of pages of documents in the National Archives," researching JFK's death.

Attorney Jim Lesar, president of the Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington, D.C., said, "I know no basis for any suspicion, but I don't know a great deal at this point. ... I've been getting conflicting reports on his age. Was he 39 or 46?

"I don't know of anything that Bob was working on that put him in jeopardy. I heard that he was investigating the murder of a former girlfriend. That would probably be more likely a cause of any foul play," said Lesar, whose brother, Keith, is a lawyer in Aptos.

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IF ROBERT WERE ALIVE TO READ THIS, HE WOULD TURN IN HIS GRAVE! NO, YOU DON'T GOTTA WONDER.
PLH